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Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Hepworth Bhengu: A pioneer Ubuntu Pentecostal

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Background: Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Hepworth Bhengu is a child of *amakholwa* [believers], a term that separated Christian converts from non-converts. *Amakholwa* were given Christian names, made to change their dress code, as seen in all his photos, to reflect being civilised and being a Christian. His Christian names were Nicholas and Hepworth. Possibly, his parents or missionaries also gave him an isiZulu name, *Bhekinkos*i – translated 'look at or to the king', presumably a supreme being [*uMvelinqangi*], echoing belief in a divine from an Ubuntu worldview or the Christian God. The former being the possibility because of his parents' background and the influence of missionaries in their lives. He is a founder and pastor of the Back to God Crusade, a Pentecostal mission organisation that later turned into a southern African denomination, Back to God-Assemblies of God.

Objectives: This article analyses the work and ministry of Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Hepworth Bhengu his work through his isiZulu name, *Bhekinkosi*.

Methods: This article applies the Lekgotla practical theology research method grounded on the framework of Ubuntu Pentecostalism.

Results: This article demonstrates that, true to his name, *Bhekinkosi's* vision of drowning people laid the foundation for him to look to or at Jesus instead of ancestors. It is also an echo of Ubuntu Pentecostal practice and concretises it among his followers and among other African Pentecostals.

Conclusion: Nicholas *Bhekinkosi*'s vision of people drowning in an ocean and Jesus appearing to him and showing him an open Bible laid the necessary foundation for him to look at Jesus, not ancestors, to help people come to God.

Contribution: This vision became central to his preaching and teaching ministry and stablishing the Back to God Crusade that later became a southern African denomination.

Keywords: *Bhekinkosi; uMvelinqangi;* Christian God; Ubuntu values; Christo-centric; Ubuntu Pentecostalism.

Introduction

Naming a child reflects a Setswana idiom, *leina lebe ke seromo* – translated as a person lives up to her or his name. The equivalent isiZulu idiom is *umuntu ufuz' igama lakhe*. Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Bhengu was born on 05 September 1909, at eNtumeni Mission Station in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. His father, a Lutheran evangelist, was a twin brother of a king who handed him to the missionaries to raise as a way of resolving future succession rivalry between them.[1]

Lephoko (2018:44) mentions that his mother's maiden isiZulu name, Nxele, while his father had two names, Josiah (Christian) and Khanda (isiZulu–translated 'head'). It is quite strange that his mother did not have a Christian name. Perhaps her Christian name is omitted or she was not raised within a mission station where Christian naming was the norm.

After his conversion in Kimberly in 1930, Nicholas *Bhekinkos*i Bhengu entered theological training from 1934 to 1936 at the South African General Mission Bible School in Dumisa and was ordained as minister of the Assemblies of God in 1937. He later founded the Back to God evangelistic movement in 1950 in Duncan Village, East London to pursue his deep passion of reaching souls after he saw a vison of people bound in chains crying for help

1.Conversation with one of Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Hepworth Bhengu descendants after 09 September 2025 Nicholas Bhengu Memorial colloquium held at the University of Pretoria.

(Lephoko 2018:78–79) emphasised through his popular slogans: 'Jesus for Africa', 'Africa for Jesus' and 'Cape to Cairo'.

The huge church building in East London, built in the 1950s showed his passion for souls through the message of the gospel, making the 1959 *Times Magazine* name him the 'Black Billy Graham of Africa'. Later, he was called 'the first great African-born Pentecostal evangelist' (Lephoko 2018:248).

Research methods and design

This article is a Lekgotla practical theology research method that analyses the ministry of Nicholas *Bhekinkosi* Hepworth Bhengu through his African name, *Bhekinkosi*. This research method is conceptualised through the Setswana community meeting process, consisting of four steps namely, describing the situation, participation, consensus and presenting (Mzondi 2022a:4–9). The article consists of three main sections: *Bhekinkosi:* Describe the situation, *Bhekinkosi's* conversion and Pentecostalism: Participation and consensus, and *Bhekinkosi's* calling and ministry: Presenting.

The article's framework is Ubuntu Pentecostalism (Mzondi 2019, 2022b). This is Pentecostalism that presents the African encounter with Pentecostalism in South Africa as a non-static. It traces it to William Seymour as the first form through the Apostolic Faith Mission, followed by that of Zionist churches, and African Pentecostals who established churches and those who remained in Pentecostal mission churches. The major difference lies in fusing ancestor veneration with Pentecostalism (Mzondi 2024a:2; see Mzondi 2019:35, 2022b:39, and Mzondi 2009:45–51).

Bhekinkosi: Describe the situation

As mentioned in the abstract, *Bhekinkosi* is translated 'look at/to the king'. This name could presumably refer to a supreme being – *uMvelinqangi* – echoing belief in a divine from an Ubuntu worldview or the Christian God. The article considers both inferences plausible and discusses how his name manifested in his calling and ministry.

A supreme being – uMvelinqangi

Nolte and Downing (2019:14–15) shared that, among Africans, the living values embedded in African spirituality help individuals preserve individual, family and community well-being. Such is the multi-dimensional nature, which includes aspects related to the ancestors, developing one's life purpose, being cognisant of one's life calling, a belief in a higher Gods, the use of traditional medicine and practices that connect with the transcendent (Brown, Muckaden & Mndende 2021:44–45). *Bhekinkosi* combines two isiZulu names, *bheka* – translated look and *nkos*i – translated king. Placed within the isiZulu cultural context and spirituality the name infer, look at/to the king, who is supposedly representing the supreme being in all spirituality matters.

A study by Olupona (2014:1–131) found that in African societies, kings were revered as sacred beings associated with Gods, responsible for state well-being and prosperity. Their role in maintaining social order led to frequent ceremonies to reassure people of their well-being.

The name anticipates the intervention of a supreme being – *uMvelinqangi*, who oral tradition describes as the creator of all and accessed through ancestors, nearer to him – in all aspects of life, as the African worldview does not dichotomise life because the supernatural influences the natural with the purpose of seeking and balance and harmony in all aspects of life (Von Kapff 2012:8–9). One word, Ubuntu, entails such spirituality. Knoetze (2019:8) further opined that this holistic approach promotes resilience, deepens Ubuntu, strengthens social bonds and secures the intergenerational transfer of cultural values.

Hence, Nolte and Downing (2019:15) posit that Ubuntu is a comprehensive ancient African worldview, founded upon the principles of profound humanity, sharing, caring, respect, compassion and related ideals, thereby enabling a more interconnected and healthy community life, in the spirit of family. Ubuntu can therefore be seen to serve as the bedrock of African spirituality (Mabvurira 2020: 74), where ancestors serve as mediators between a supreme being and humans. They are regarded as providers of security and are called upon to help during times of despair (Chidester 2014:3–5).

The Christian God

The Christian God is described as one eternal self-existing God, co-existing in three persons as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (Williams n.d.:16–17). This existence is called the Trinity, a distinguishing aspect of Christianity among other religions. This aspect finds expression in the following:

> When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become, in Irenaeus' beautiful image, the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace. (see Against Heresies 5,6,1 in Volf (1996:128f)

The Bible also presents humankind as the crown of all creation by presenting the story of creation, the fall (Gn 1–3) and redemption through God the Son who died on the cross to redeem humankind (Mt 1:21), was buried and rose on the third day, and ascended to heaven after 40 days (Mt 27:45–66; 28:1–10; Lk 24:50–53; Ac 1:6–11). This redemption of those who believed in Jesus – the Son of God – will culminate at his return (Ac 1:11; Rv 1:7–9).

Bhekinkosi's conversion and Pentecostalism: Participation and consensus

Conversion

Bhekinkosi worked as a court interpreter (Lephoko 2018:87) at Durban before moving to Kimberly, where he continued with his nominal Lutheran faith and became an active member of the Communist Party (Lephoko 2018:200, 244).

Later, these skills and experiences featured in his ministry as leader of the Back to God – Assemblies of God.

His conversion that happened at a Full Gospel crusade meeting at Kimberly (Lephoko 2018:45–46) in 1930 suggests that he was a nominal Lutheran Christian, as he gave up smoking and drinking to show that he had embraced Pentecostalism. His conversion introduced him to American Pentecostalism through the evangelistic ministry of the Full Gospel Church missionary. The Full Gospel Church is one of the oldest Pentecostal Churches in South Africa. The Full Gospel Church was established after the Bethel Pentecostal Assembly (Newark, New Jersey, United States) sent missionaries to South Africa (Hobe 2024:2886).

Pentecostalism

Pentecostal churches teach justification by faith, sanctification as a definite work of grace, baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, divine healing 'as in atonement' and the personal pre-millennial rapture of the saints at the second coming of Christ (Khathide 2010:62). In a summary, like in all Pentecostal circles, the Full Gospel Church upholds baptism in the Holy Spirit and the function of the charismata are key in the Full Gospel Church (Hocken 1976:83). Chetty (2002) states that the Full Gospel Church and the Apostolic Faith Mission share the same teachings:

> [C]hurches laid emphasis on the New Testament character of the church; both administered baptism by way of immersion; both revealed a strong belief in the imminent return of Jesus. Also, the preaching of divine healing and holiness was always at the centre of their teachings; both were also highly evangelically orientated. (p. 33)

After his conversion in Kimberly, he later returned to Durban, Natal, where he served under the ministry of Job Chiliza (Lephoko 2018:49–50, 86), who was a member of the Full Gospel Church and leader of the African section. Chiliza later established the African Gospel Church in 1949.

Bhekinkosi's second stint with Pentecostalism was with the Assemblies of God after his training at kwaDumisa Bible School and securing at a job as an evangelist in 1936 at Emmanuel Mission, a mission church H C Phillips led (Lephoko 2018:86–87, 200). This denomination emerged after a group of American and European missionaries, working in South Africa, decided to establish one umbrella organisation.

Bhekinkosi's calling and ministry. Presenting

Calling

As mentioned above, *Bhekinkosi* served under Job Chiliza and appears to have begun preaching during that time before he joined the Assemblies of God in 1938. He attended theological training at Dumisa Bible School – South African General Mission Bible School (Lephoko 2018:48, 77) and furthered his theological studies at Taylor University, Indiana, in the United States (Lephoko 2018:48).

After serving for some time at H.C. Phillips's Emmaneul Mission, he later began to work closely with James Mullan, an Irish missionary who was based in Tzaneen. The two pioneered church planting work among Africans, with Port Elizabeth being the most area they reached.

Bhekinkosi established the Back to God Crusade in the 1950s to continue his preaching ministry driven by his vision of people bound hands and feet in chains in an ocean crying for help, and how could he help them? then Jesus showed him an open Bible as a means to help these people (Lephoko 2018:78–79). This vision reflects the Pentecostal belief in continuation of the charismata, specifically, dreams and visions, which area also believed in the Ubuntu worldview that ancestors, who are closer to *Umvelinqangi*, communicate to humans through them. The appearance of Jesus points to the triune God and challenges the Ubuntu world view about the role of ancestors among the isiZulu speaking nation.

The Ubuntu worldview teaches that ancestors play an essential role in times of despair (Chidester 2014:3–5). To the contrary, the Christian God, through Jesus, the second person of the triune God, appeared to him and showed him that the answer in times of despair he saw in the vision is the Bible, not ancestors. This open Bible also points to the triune God. Therefore, Jesus, not ancestors, is the mediator between God and humans (Tm 1 2:4–6).

Undoubtedly, *Bhekinkosi*, was taught the essential truth to look at Jesus, not *Umvelinqangi*, to help people trapped in sin. The ancestors, though communicating to Ubuntu adherends, through visions and dreams, do not feature in addressing the sinful conditions of humans, only Jesus, who appeared to him in his vision, features. This only happens through his preaching the message of the Bible. Jesus and the open Bible show preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ that emphasises an essential truth that there is no continuity between the role of ancestors and Jesus (Tm 1 2:4–6). Jesus came to save humans from their sin (Mt 1:21; Lk 24:45–48; Jn 6:47). He is only way to the Christian God (Jn 14:6).

Consequently, he was indirectly taught, through this vision, that his name, *Bhekinkos*i, then and after translates 'look at Jesus' – who every knee will bow (Phlp 2:9–11) and shall come as the king of kings (Rv 19:16) – for help, not to an isiZulu king. This vision showed him that, though being an isiZulu speaking person with an isiZulu name – pointing to the Ubuntu worldview, his Pentecostal belief in visions and dreams should now be grounded on the Bible, not on Ubuntu teachings about visions and dreams. This shift is seen in his preaching and church planting ministry, where aspects of Ubuntu and Pentecostalism feature strongly.

Ministry

Bhekinkosi entered ministry under the tutelage on Job Chiliza, an outstanding Pentecostal who then was affiliated with the Full Gospel Church after he had spent some time associating with the Zionist church of Ezra Mbonambi that was one of

the churches that seceded from the Christian Catholic Church in Zion (Khathide 2010:102,119). By then, Job Chiliza had converted from Zionism (Khathide 2010:52–53) and later realised that Mbonambi and other African church leaders, who established independent churches, had fused ancestral veneration with Pentecostalism (Khathide 2010:108). He became a Pentecostal who then taught discontinuity between ancestors and Jesus. Even though ancestor veneration is an essential aspect of Ubuntu worldview.

Mzondi (2019:70–74; 2022b:80–84) labels such prepositions African Pentecostalism and its proponents Ubuntu Pentecostals, because they are Africans who displayed the Ubuntu worldview and embraced Pentecostalism without practising ancestor veneration and all practices related to it. Ubuntu Pentecostals refer to African Christian leaders who embraced William Seymour's Pentecostalism and later fused it with ancestor veneration or opted to discard ancestor veneration. The first to fuse the two are Daniel Nkonyane and Elias Mahlangu, who seceded from the Christian Catholic Church in Zion to establish independent churches (Mzondi 2019:47–48, 66, 2022a:68, 74–75). Chiliza belong to the second group (Mzondi 2019:72–74, 2022a:81–84).

*Bhekinkos*i, who undoubtedly Chiliza influenced during his period at the Full Gospel Church in Natal, is counted among the latter group. He later left Chiliza's church to begin working at Emmanuel Missions in 1938 and later developed a working relationship with an Irish Pentecostal missionary, James Mullan. This relationship birthed the Back to God Crusade, whose evangelistic efforts reached Port Elizabeth and East London and other areas in the 1950s (Lephoko 2018:114–117). The Back to God Crusade that was established a few years (Lephoko 2018:134) after Chiliza established African Gospel Church in 1948 continued to emphasise and popularise the following slogans: 'back to God', 'Africa for Jesus', 'Jesus for Africa' and 'Cape to Cairo'. (Lephoko 2018: 134–136). This cry manifested in the two choruses Lephoko sung during my personal conversation with me:

(A)

Africa back to God, Africa back to God
We are praying, we are singing
Africa back to God

Africa back to God, Africa back to God
We are praying, we are singing
Africa back to God

(B)

Somlandela, somlandel' uJeso	[I will follow, I will follow Jesus]
Somlandela, somlandel' uJeso	[I will follow, I will follow Jesus]
Lapho ayakhona, somlandela	[Wherever he goes, I will follow]

His ministry and work undoubtedly contributed to three essential Pentecostal developments on the African continent: (1) the spread of Pentecostalism in Southern Africa; (2) and added to Enock Sontonga's hymn and call of '*Woza Moya*' – come Holy Spirit on Africa – thus, later contributing to the subsequent Pentecostalisation of the African church (Mzondi 2018); and (3) the concretisation of Ubuntu Pentecostalism among African Pentecostals (Mzond 2019; 2022).

Bhekinkosi, Ubuntu values and Christo-centric emphasis

Nolte and Downing (2019:15) have identified the following as Ubuntu principles: humanity, sharing, caring, respect and compassion, while Mzondi (2019:35, 2022b:39; see also Mzondi 2009:45–51) lists the following five Ubuntu values: caring, sharing, respect, *seriti* or *isithunzi* [moral force] and belief in the divine.

Bhekinkosi's ministry calling and ministry was within the context of the manifestation of the Ubuntu value of belief in the divine among influential African Pentecostal leaders – Daniel Nkonyane and Elias Mahlangu. The two seceding from the Christian Catholic Church in Zion, the Wakkerstroom section African of the Apostolic Faith Mission. Later, two prominent Christian leaders who followed this trend were Engenas Lekganyane and Christina Nku. These experienced different visions and dreams, two essential events that adherents of Ubuntu perceived to be communication from the ancestors (Mzondi 2019:84–86, 2022b:95–98). Their visions and dreams became instrumental to fusing ancestor veneration with Pentecostalism.

On the contrary, two incidents helped *Bhekinkosi* not to be swayed by this practice namely, his association with Chiliza and the vision of people bound feet and hands with chains drowning in an ocean, and Jesus appearing to him and showing him an open Bible to help the drowning people.

This vision resonates with the Ubuntu value of belief in the divine. It was an essential starting point to being Christo-centric, as Christ was central to his vision. Lephoko (2018:256) posits that he was a crucicentrist – someone who emphasises Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The sub-section (*Bhekinkosi, Ubuntu values and Christo-centric emphasisis*) of the article provides an additional perspective from his ministry through his African name and the Ubuntu worldview.

True to his name, *Bhekinkosi*, he displayed a commitment to looking to or at Jesus instead of ancestors and using the Bible to reach people with his 'back to God', 'Jesus for Africa', 'Africa for Jesus' and 'Cape to Cairo' slogans. His discontinuity with ancestors is heard in his sermon (Lephoko 2018) as he placed the cross at the centre:

> The cross is our starting point, and I preach the cross of Jesus Christ as a starting point for Africa … Jesus Christ did on the cross … We lift up Jesus, the Saviour who died on a cross and prayed for all the guilty … We are preaching the cross in Africa, and many people who have never heard of Jesus Christ are coming to the Lord. (pp. 106–107)

It is important to emphasise that in reference to Philippians 2:9–11, he calls Jesus 'the Lord', a proclamation that sets Jesus

above all on earth and heaven, including ancestors considered closer to *Umvelinqangi.* This echo: 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, is the author and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12:2 a–b, NIV). He used the belief in as a point on contact to present the message of the gospel to Africans (Lephoko 2018:106). This demonstrates that he was aware of Ubuntu worldview and its value of the belief in the divine, yet he placed Jesus above this belief. He also attracted many people because he allowed *lobola* [bride price] and male circumcision (Lephoko 2018:168, 187) and was an advocate of Africans preaching to Africans because they knew and understood their worldview (Lephoko 2018:183, 194, 200).

He also displayed another Christo-centric emphasis after his vision of women in doeks as the strategy for generating financial resources instead of relying on missionaries (Lephoko 2018:140–143). His deep yearning for financial independence characterised his view on missionary funding (Lephoko 2018:145, 148, 195). This is an aspect that promotes the human dignity of believers by inculcating hard work that produces biblical prosperity that benefits everyone in the church, resulting in a holistic gospel that echoes the Ubuntu worldview does not separate the physical from the metaphysical. tangible. God provided a financial strategy to sustain the work of Back to God Crusade using indigenous approaches to raise money (Lephoko 2018:144, 249).

This non-binary fund-raising strategy anchored his trust in God and his Christo-centric stance. This stance is further seen in that he did not misappropriate the church's finances (Lephoko 2018:174, 245); instead he promoted accountability by building an accountability system that hung around the teaching team (Lephoko 2018:216) and the various national and regional structures (Lephoko 2018:131–142). This organisational management (Lephoko 2018:131–142) seems to stem from his reverence for God and partly from his previous experiences as a court interpreter and member of the communist party. This development demonstrated his *seriti* or *isithunzi* [moral force], that is, he was a person of high integrity. A person of 'impeccable character' at the time he joined Emmanuel Missions (Lephoko 2018:87) who publicly declared before God and man that 'I have taken no money from you for myself apart from what I take for the work of the God and other poorer countries' (Resane & Lephoko 2026:5).

His ministry reflected that he was compassionate. The socio-economic conditions of people moved him as he ministered to them and taught that they should not only believe Jesus to turn their conditions around, but they should be economically independent and embrace working hard to earn a living (Lephoko 2018:248), a discipline that could have been learned during his time with Job Chiliza, who was a preacher and shoemaker. As a compassionate–visionary leader, he placed the interest of the community first, in this case, the development of young people in the church. He did so by promoting education in the church and established a bursary fund for youth in the church to pursue tertiary education (Lephoko 2018:246).

He displayed the values of care and respect as he interacted with different people when preaching to them (Lephoko 2018:110, 113) and was globally respected (Lephoko 2018:111, 112). He also shared his resources and life with others and opted to live a simple instead of an opulent life (Lephoko 2018:174, 245–246). He unashamedly wrote all assemblies' pastors and district councils about his values, where he declared that 'I have desired no high life, luxury, pomp, greatness, wealth, name, fame nor vain glory' (Resane & Lephoko 2026:5).

Conclusion

Africans believe that a name carries and communicates a past or future event. Hence, careful consideration is undertaken when naming a child. Nicholas *Bhekinkos*i Hepworth Bhengu was given two English names and one African name. His English names were a symbol of his Christian upbringing and colonial influence, while his African name might be a symbol of Christian upbringing or a symbol of belief in the supreme being for divine intervention.

The article argues that he emulated his African name *Bhekinkosi*, translated look at or to the king. His vision of people drowning in an ocean and Jesus appearing to him and showing him an open Bible laid the necessary foundation for him to look at Jesus, not ancestors, to help people come to God. This vision became central to his preaching and teaching ministry, and establishing the Back to God Crusade that later became a southern African denomination.

In the Ubuntu worldview, visions and dreams are considered means of communication with ancestors, perceived as nearer to *Umvelinqangi* – the creator. Unlike some influential early 20th century African Pentecostal leaders, who experienced visions and dreams and later fused Pentecostalism with ancestor veneration, he did not. He manifested an Ubuntu Pentecostal practice and concretised it among his followers and among other African Pentecostals. He further lived up to his name, *Bhekinkosi,* by looking at or to Jesus for help in times of distress and discharging his ministry among Africans and other nations through his popular slogans: 'back to God', 'Jesus for Africa', 'Africa for Jesus' and 'Cape to Cairo'. His ministry displayed Ubuntu values of caring, sharing, respect, *seriti* or *isithunzi* [moral force] and belief in the divine by emphasising a Christo-centric approach. Hence, the article presents him as 'A pioneer Ubuntu Pentecostal'.

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Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Abraham Modisa Mkhondo Mzondi: Conceptualisation. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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